



RESEARCH BRIEF

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Delayed Homelessness After Military Discharge: Examination of a “Sleeper Effect”



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What do we know?

The time from military discharge to homelessness (DTH) is an important part of understanding Veteran homelessness and has the potential to inform homeless prevention efforts after military service. A study of roughly 600 homeless Vietnam and post-Vietnam Veterans reported the average DTH period was 14 years.¹ Another study of 500,000 Veterans separating from the military in 2005-2006 followed them post-military through 2010 and found that the median DTH period was close to 3 years. Veterans who served in Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, and New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND)¹ have been found to have higher rates of homelessness than non-OEF/OIF/OND Veterans.²

New information provided by the study

Using administrative VA data, 275,772 Veterans discharged from the military in 2000-2018 had a post-discharge indication of homelessness or housing instability in 2000-2019. This was defined as (1) ICD code² for homelessness (V60.0 in ICD-9, Z59.0 in ICD-10); (2) outpatient codes for Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV), Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD), U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program, and community outreach; (3) inpatient codes for Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans (DCHV) and Compensated Work-Therapy/ Transitional Residence Programs (CWT/TR); (4) and entries into HCHV, GPD, HUD-VASH, DCHV, and CWT/TR recorded in the Homeless Operations Management and Evaluation System (HOMES). The analyses

¹ Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) is the official name used for the War in Afghanistan (2001- 2014). Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) Operation and Operation New Dawn (OND) are the names used for the War in Iraq (2003-2011).

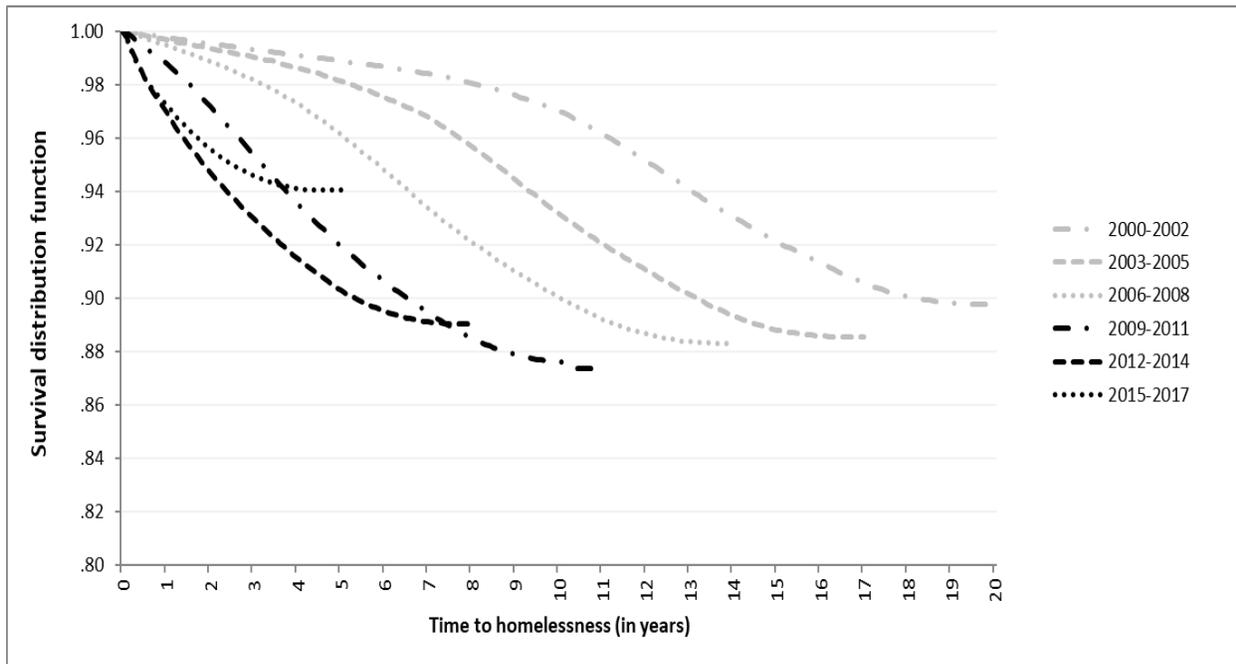
² International Classification of Diseases (ICD) codes are used to record medical information for the purposes of billing, treatments, and statistics collection.

focused on the first such indication in the Veteran’s post-discharge medical record.

On average, Veterans who used VA homeless services had a mean DTH period of 5.5 (standard deviation=4.2) years. OEF/OIF/OND Veterans had shorter DTH periods and higher risk of homelessness or housing instability than those who served before the Persian Gulf War (1990-91). Unmarried Veterans, including those who were separated, divorced, or widowed, as well as those in racial/ethnic minority groups, and Veterans with mental health and substance use conditions also had shorter DTH periods.

Presented in Figure 1, time-to-event analyses suggest that DTH periods have shortened with more recent cohorts of Veterans, although this may at least partly be due to the shorter observation period. For example, among Veterans discharged from 2000 to 2002, 10% of them first experienced homelessness or housing instability 18 years after discharge. Among Veterans discharged 2003-2005 and 2006-2008, 10% of them first experienced homelessness or housing instability 14 and 10 years, respectively, after military discharge. Among more recent discharges, 10% of the 2009-2011 cohort first experienced homelessness or housing instability 7 years after discharge.

Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier curves of time from discharge to homelessness stratified by year of discharge among VA service users



There were limitations to the quality and timeframe of the data, as well as how homeless/housing instability was defined, so further research is needed. However, this study suggests evidence of a “sleeper effect,” with homelessness and housing instability often first occurring 5-15 years after military discharge.

Clinical Relevance:

1. After Veterans leave the military, it often takes a few years before they become homeless and engage with VA services; it may be informative to understand what critical events happened that led to their homelessness.

2. Certain groups of Veterans, including those who are unmarried and those in racial/ethnic minority groups, are at greater risk of becoming homeless sooner after military discharge; early prevention efforts should consider these factors.

Full text of study: [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(20\)30096-9/pdf](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(20)30096-9/pdf)

References

¹ Mares AS, Rosenheck RA. (2004). Perceived relationship between military service and homelessness among homeless veterans with mental illness. *J Nerv Ment Dis*, 192(10):715–719.

<https://doi.org/10.1097/01.nmd.0000142022.08830.f4>.

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General. (2012). *Homeless incidence and risk factors for becoming homeless in veterans*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General.